

Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentleman,

My name is Jubenal Gonzalez. I've been a career Firefighter/Paramedic with the Town of Manchester Fire, Rescue and EMS Department for the past 20 years. In January of 2013, I joined a club I never wanted to become a part of – The Manchester Firefighters with Cancer Club. I hope it shocks you to learn that, currently; there are 6 of us who have, or have had cancer, and are still healthy enough to be able to continue working in a Department of just 65 firefighters! Jeff, John, Scott, Jimmy, Brian, and I are all active-duty cancer survivors, so far, but not one of us really knows what the future holds for us. There are several other firefighters who have been diagnosed with cancer, and are now retired. The numbers are staggering, and the current Bill in the State of Connecticut has not provided benefits for a single one of us. It is meaningless in its current form, and must be amended. I implore you to do the right thing, rise above the rhetoric, and choose to support this bill.

My journey began about 2 years ago, when I discovered a lump in my face while shaving. My first reaction was that of denial, yet, deep inside, I knew what it was. A sense of panic set in, and I began to wonder how I would tell my wife and daughter that I potentially had cancer. After being examined by my doctor, and undergoing an MRI, I quickly learned that it was most likely a cancerous tumor. After doing some research, I also learned that the mass was in an especially difficult location, and that the biopsy, and subsequent surgery I would need to remove it, put me at a very high risk for facial paralysis, which quite possibly, would have ended my career. As a result, choosing the right surgeon to biopsy it, and remove it, if it were confirmed to be cancerous, became essential. Though this presented a tremendous financial hardship for my family, I was able to gather the financial resources necessary to travel to Johns Hopkins Hospital, in Maryland, where the foremost expert in this extremely rare type of cancer successfully removed my tumor, and preserved my facial nerves. In addition to the travel expenses to and from Maryland, my family also had to come up with the means so that I could remain there, in a hotel, for a week, following my discharge from the hospital, so that I could be close to my surgeon for the necessary post-operative follow-up I required, and in the event there were any complications, which there were, as no local surgeon had the experience, or possessed the skills necessary to handle post-operative complications, related to this rare surgical procedure. Also,

fortunately for me, my brother and sister firefighters stepped up and were willing to cover my shifts if I ran out of sick time, as they had done time and time, again for others in the same situation, because everyone knew Worker's Compensation would not. Otherwise, like many others before me, my family and I could have lost everything.

Seriously, think about that for just a minute.... Imagine that you're battling cancer, you're fighting for your very life, AND you're wondering if you're going to lose your home – all because a bunch of people are *pretending* that your cancer isn't related to your career as a firefighter. They're fooling no one. Of course it's related to their job. Each and every one of our cancers IS job related. Period. The research is compelling, and can no longer be ignored.

I now have a large scar on my face that reminds me every day that I'm a cancer survivor. Every time I shave, I hold my breath and hope that I don't find another lump. I also sweat every time I eat, but only on the side of my face where the cancer was removed, which is more than a little embarrassing. I also now only make about half of the saliva of a person without salivary gland cancer, which makes for a very dry mouth, and is why I'm constantly chewing gum. More than this, though, is the nagging voice in the back of my mind that keeps wondering if the cancer will return.

Your public servants are in dire need of your support. When you have an emergency, you call 911, and we respond. This is our emergency, and we're calling you. Will you respond?

Others will come before you, speaking in opposition to this proposed bill, including municipalities and their hired "subject matter experts". Each will present you with their reasons why you should not support this bill. Most likely, they will provide you with facts and figures that include statistical data and compensation figures they claim will crush them, and ask you to accept them without reservation, while at the same time, demanding that you dismiss the actual, statistically significant, scientifically proven, and widely accepted fact that firefighters have an elevated risk of numerous different types of cancer. It's utter madness, yet, in the end, they will cry poor, and say that passage of this bill will create an unmanageable financial burden.

Ironically though, the one thing they will avoid presenting to you is the human element, a name, a face, or a family, who has faced cancer and found that, without Worker's Compensation Benefits, it presented them with an actual, rather than perceived or imagined, unmanageable

financial burden. The goal and main focus of those speaking against this bill is to divert your attention away from the *actual* financial devastation firefighters with cancer experience, toward the invented financial burden municipalities claim exists. Importantly, however, they are not firefighters at an increased risk of cancer, so they are unlikely to be effected by this bill not passing.

We are not asking for something that will be catastrophic for any city or town, nor are we asking for something that's never been done before. Actually, many states have been where you are right now, today, and to their credit, they understood that the ample body of scientific evidence was indisputable, and that it spoke louder than the municipalities crying poverty, in opposition. They appreciated the inescapable causal relationship between the carcinogens firefighters are exposed to, and the increased incidence of cancer among this group. They appreciated the human toll cancer takes on an individual, and their family, and accepted that it was morally and ethically imperative to protect those who protect them, and passed legislation to do so! They were wise, and brave, and chose to do the right thing. None of them has gone bankrupt because of it. It is our hope that you follow in their path.

Consider that each and every one of us firefighters is willing to risk our life each day we come to work; we run into burning buildings, when everyone else is running out; we venture out, on foot and unprotected, onto a busy highway to render care to a fellow citizen who desperately needs our service; we provide a lifeline and perform CPR in a stranger's home, thereby ensuring they have at least a chance of survival ~ and we do it gladly, because we are public servants. We are asking that, in return for our selfless courage, the State of Connecticut's Worker's Compensation Fund be there for us ~ in our time of need. It's really not that much to ask, especially when you all know that, in return, we will have your back, in your time of need. I ask you to consider for a moment that your son or daughter is a firefighter, or married to a firefighter, who becomes diagnosed with cancer. Would you expect that Worker's Compensation would be there for them, and their family, when they were in the fight of their life? I have carefully chosen the word "when", because "if" doesn't begin to tell the story of a Firefighter's lifetime risk of cancer. Again, the numbers are staggering in that all firefighters are known to carry an increased risk of cancer. Yet, without us being willing to do what we do every day, countless lives and millions of dollars in property would be lost annually.

I consider myself to be one of the lucky ones - so far. My main goals now are to see my daughter grow up, play basketball, and help her to achieve her goals in life, while spending time with my wife, and continuing to serve my community. Yet, there are countless other firefighters in our state who have already succumbed to cancer, leaving behind their wives, their husbands, their sons and daughters. Still, there are many more of us who have been diagnosed with cancer, either on the job, or who have been forced to retire because of it. I'm here before you today on behalf of myself and my family, as well as on behalf of all of those who could not be here; to give a voice to those who would otherwise remain silent – either because they are too ill to attend or because they are no longer with us at all. This is your opportunity to speak for them, as well. Speak with your conscience and vote in support of this bill.

Respectfully,

Jubenal Gonzalez

My official diagnosis was Mucoepidermoid carcinoma - parotid glandular cancer.

I am here in support proposed bill number 5871, "An Act Concerning Workers Compensation Coverage and Emergency Service Personnel."